

BOOK OF REVELATION, WEEK 2
CHAPTERS 2 AND 3

The angel of the Lord directs John to address letters to the seven churches. While each of the letters is pertinent to a particular church, the collection serves as a instruction for the universal Church, present in the first century, and throughout history.

STRUCTURE AND GENERAL CONTENT OF THE LETTERS

WHY WERE THESE CHURCHES CHOSEN?

One of the more intriguing questions about the letters to the churches, is why these particular churches would have been chosen. If these churches were represented by the 7 lampstands, which also represent the 7 Spirits (or sevenfold Spirit) of God, then it could seem that these were the seven pillar, or foundational churches of the Church, chosen for their goodness and adherence to the teachings of Christ. However, the church in Sardis is criticized for not keeping what they originally accepted and the church in Laodicea faces the grave charge of being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. Neither does it seem that these were churches selected because they needed significant correction: the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna appear to be saved from any chastisement whatsoever.

It may be worthwhile then, to recall why the nation of Israel was chosen to be the firstborn of all the nations. It was not because of either its goodness or failure. Israel was chosen because God chose to choose Israel. The reason for the selection is not about Israel or the churches themselves, but about God, who chooses whom He chooses. We see this play out throughout history with individuals. Many of the patriarchs committed some very serious sins and failures, some of them after their selection by God. One of the primary lessons that Jewish scholars and experts in Sacred Scripture draw from this is that God's favor rested on them, because God chose them to be favored.

WHAT CAN WE SEE THROUGH THEIR SELECTION?

There is some significant to their geographic position. If you map the churches in order, they form a kind of circle.

The number 7 symbolizes fullness and completeness.

They form a complete picture of the Church.

The letters follow some general rules with regard to the kind of content and common themes:

A particular way of naming, or describing Christ

Commendation

Chastisement

A description of the presence of opposition

The giving of a remedy

A specific reward given to the faithful

Andrew of Caesarea describes a kind of movement in the spiritual life

EPHESUS

Christ: The one who holds the 7 stars

Commendation: Intolerance of wickedness and they are not fooled by false Apostles

Chastisement: Lost passion for their love for Jesus

Opposition: Imposter Apostles

Remedy: Recall the good works you did in the beginning and how far you have fallen

Reward: Will eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden of God

Andrew of Caesarea: Choose the spiritual ear over the carnal ear

SMYRNA

Christ: The First and the Last who died and resurrected

Commendation: Standing strong against tribulation and poverty

Chastisement: For the slander of the Jews. Given the testimony of Paul in his letter to the Romans, this may refer to a division in the community between the Jews and Gentiles, such that the Jews criticize the Gentiles as having to first adopt the practices of the Jews.

*This chastisement is not clear and some commentators have described this letter, along with the letter to the church in Philadelphia, as not having a correction, but only commendation.

Opposition: Satan's assembly (who commit slander)

Remedy: Keep steadfast in testimony to Christ through any persecution, imprisonment and even death

Reward: Will not be harmed by the second death

Andrew of Caesarea: Choose spiritual goods or worldly things

PERGAMUM

Christ: The one with the sharp, two-edged sword

Commendation: Standing firm and not denying the name of Jesus

Chastisement: Some are being led astray and given to acts of immorality, indicated by the Nicolaitans and Balak, who led Israel into the immoral acceptance of idols.

* The Nicolaitans were known for overindulging in pleasures and worldly comforts and often linked with sexual immorality.

Opposition: Where Satan lives

Remedy: Repent

Reward: Will receive the hidden Manna and a new name

Andrew of Caesarea: Choose love of people or love of God

THYATIRA

Christ: The Son of God with eyes like fiery flame and feet like polished brass

Commendation: Increasing in works of love, faith, service and endurance

Chastisement: Giving over to Jezebel, who leads them to act like the other nations

Opposition: Swayed by deep secrets of Satan

Remedy: Hold fast to what you have, while the evil is purged

Reward: To them will be given authority over the nations

Andrew of Caesarea: Choose spiritual or physical intimacy. The lust for being satisfied by physical things, unites one to physical things over spiritual unity

SARDIS

Christ: The One who has the 7 Spirits and 7 Stars

Commendation: Accepting the Word with great life

Chastisement: Have not kept what they accepted in the beginning, and having allowed their initial obedience to wain with regard to virtues and Christians actions (having soiled garments is an indication of sinfulness and turning away from the virtues, while the virtuous person still has white garments)

Opposition: Dead in the Spirit

Remedy: Be watchful and repent (be vigilant in obedience)

Reward: Will be dressed in white and their name will remain in the Book of Life

Andrew of Caesarea: To be good is not the same as appearing to be good; one must choose to be good, rather than resting on the laurels of past reputation

PHILADELPHIA

Christ: The Holy One who holds the key of David

Commendation: Kept to the Word of God and not denied His name

Chastisement: There is no chastisement or reproof of the community. This could indicate the significance and affect of “Keeping the Word and not denying His name”.

Opposition: Assembly of Satan who will bow at your feet

*Smyrna was also described as being in the presence of the Assembly of Satan. However, the promise that they will “bow at your feet” is different. This may suggest a similarity, but a significant difference because the community at Smyrna suffered under the weight of slander, not mentioned in Philadelphia. It could be a warning that even. community that is otherwise healthy, remains subject to the threat of slander from within, as a final sin to overcome.

Remedy: Hold fast so that no one will “take your crown”

Reward: Will make into a pillar in the Temple of God

Andrew of Caesarea: If you have done these previous things, you have acted well and must persevere to the end

LAODICEA

Christ: The Amen, the faithful and true witness and source of Creation

Commendation: Other than being recognized as the object of Christ’s love, there is nothing that they are commended for (this is a natural result of being lukewarm)

Chastisement: Neither hot nor cold, but become complacent and unaware that they have lost the richness of Christ

*The town is geographically centered between a town with a hot spring and another with cold freshwater. Therefore the water that they actually received was lukewarm.

Opposition: This is the only community where there is no mention of Satan. Perhaps because there is no need for him to be present.

Remedy: Be earnest and repent: be faithful, pure and righteous in conduct, and anoint with the Holy Spirit

Reward: Gain the right the sit with the Lord on His throne

Andrew of Caesarea: Lukewarmness indicates those who attempted not to choose, but sought to hold onto both, the seed of God and the thorns of the riches of the world